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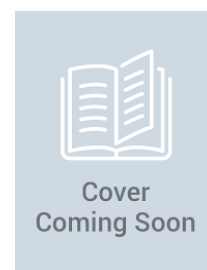
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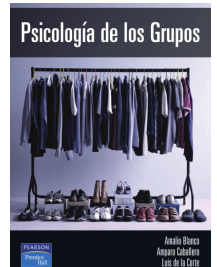
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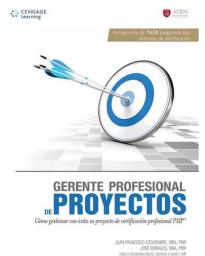
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ediciones
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JUAN MIGUEL DE LOS RÍOS
**EL FIN
DE NOSOTROS**



FINALISTA PREMIO FERNANDO LARA

El fin de nosotros

Juan Miguel de los Ríos

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ediciones
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Esta novela quedó finalista del premio Fernando Lara bajo el título de Serendipia, y con el pseudónimo de Dole Mitha

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El único viaje real del descubrimiento no consiste en buscar nuevos horizontes, sino en tener nuevos ojos.

Marcel Proust (En busca del tiempo perdido)

La mejor manera de predecir el futuro, es crearlo.

Peter Drucker

Un sutil pensamiento erróneo puede dar lugar a una indagación fructífera que revela verdades de gran valor.

Isaac Asimov

*Para mis hijos,
lumen vitae*

INFORMACIÓN PARA EL LECTOR

Querido lector,

Te embarcas en un viaje literario singular. A medida que avances en las páginas, recorrerás capítulos que harán cuestionarte el verdadero género de esta novela. Es importante que, por respeto a futuros lectores y a la esencia misma de la historia, evites revelar el final. La sorpresa y la revelación del desenlace son parte integral de esta experiencia; toda la trama culmina y cobra sentido con la última frase de la novela. Tras desvelarse este final, una relectura de la obra te podría dar una nueva y enriquecedora interpretación, donde descubrirías detalles y sutilezas que quizás antes te pasaron inadvertidas. Como decía Conan Doyle, "El mundo está lleno de cosas obvias que nadie, por alguna razón, se da cuenta nunca". La magia de esta novela radica en su descubrimiento, así que te pido que no desveles su desenlace.

Disfruta de la lectura, y del viaje :-)

GUIA DE PERSONAJES PRINCIPALES

Debido a la naturaleza de la trama, he incluido en la lectura una amplia variedad de nombres, personajes y roles. Soy consciente de que esta profusión puede resultar abrumadora y, en ocasiones, hasta distraer del hilo principal de la historia. Siguiendo el ejemplo del ilustre León Tolstoi, comienzo esta novela con una lista de los personajes principales, aquellos sobre los que gravita la esencia de la narración y a quienes te invito a prestar especial atención. Los demás personajes no los listaré. Están diseñados para enriquecer y dar profundidad al argumento. Con este resumen, espero facilitar tu inmersión en el relato y potenciar tu experiencia lectora.

Antonio Lorca. Director de la Unidad Central de Inteligencia Criminal, trabaja en la Comisaría General de Información de la Policía Nacional.

Susana Torres. Doctora en neurociencias por la Universidad de Barcelona.

Darío Montes. Agente del SAC, la Sección de Análisis de la Conducta de la Policía Nacional.

Cándido Ruiz. Es un destacado miembro de la Policía Nacional, especializado en la investigación de actividades delictivas relacionadas con las telecomunicaciones.

Xavier Brunet. Inspector del grupo de homicidios de la Policía Nacional de Valencia.

Anette Meyer. Agente alemana de la Europol y colaboradora en el Centro Europeo contra el Terrorismo.

Clara Robles. Investigadora del Hospital San Carlos, en Madrid.

Sebastián Briski. Investigador estadounidense de origen argentino, pionero de un revolucionario descubrimiento científico.

Miquel Arranz. Programador de software. Hacker.

1

El día amaneció cargado de nubes negras y llovió a mares. Lorca llegó empapado y de mal humor, cogió su taza, se sirvió un café y entró en su despacho del CGI, la Comisaría General de Información de la Policía Nacional. Javier Gómez, uno de los miembros del equipo que Lorca dirigía dentro de la Unidad Central de Inteligencia Criminal, se acercó y apuntó a una esquina de su mesa, informándole de que había llegado un sobre para él, lacrado. Lorca decidió apartarlo y recordó a Javier que se reunían en una hora para discutir el nuevo encargo que llegaba de arriba. Antonio Lorca acababa de cumplir sesenta años y le quedaba poco para jubilarse. Poseía un cuerpo robusto, con las espaldas anchas y los hombros caídos. Tenía una frente amplia, cejas gruesas, nariz achatada y un enorme hoyuelo en la barbilla. Sus ojos eran de un color azul claro intenso que aguaba su mirada. Era brusco y reservado, con pocos amigos. Su etapa de infiltrado en Euskadi lo convirtió en un personaje del que no había pistas, salvo el nombre en clave "*Mountolive*", tomado de una de las novelas de "*El cuarteto de Alejandría*". Circulaban muchas leyendas sobre él, aunque nadie estaba seguro de su veracidad.

Lorca giró el sobre y se fijó en el sello de lacre. Aparecía un extraño símbolo que le recordaba a una ilustración de un relato infantil.

– Es el Mago de Oz – escuchó la voz de Marcos Martín, otro integrante de su equipo –. El cuento de las baldosas amarillas y la niña cursi.

En el sello venía estampado un "Oz" de un color bermellón apagado. Lo olió y no percibió el olor a aceite de trementina. Con un cúter, abrió el sobre por un lateral. No figuraba ningún remitente, solo su nombre en el anverso.

– Lo entregaron en la recepción – le informó Javier–, a las seis y media de la tarde.

Lorca cerró la puerta de su despacho sin disimular su mal carácter. Cogió unos guantes de su cajón, se los enfundó y presionó el sobre con cuidado. Una hoja plegada de periódico cayó sobre la mesa. Se trataba de un recorte del diario ABC fechado el lunes 29 de junio de 1914. Junto al recorte figuraba una carta escrita con pluma estilográfica. Leyó las primeras líneas y se detuvo. Se conectó a la página web del diario ABC donde existía un acceso al archivo online del periódico desde su fundación en 1903, todo digitalizado y organizado por fechas. Halló lo que buscaba: la edición del 29 de junio de 1914. En la portada se mostraba una fotografía de la escritora Emilia Pardo Bazán. En sus páginas interiores se hablaba del asesinato del Archiduque Francisco Fernando, heredero del trono austrohúngaro, en Sarajevo. Encontró la página digitalizada que coincidía con la que tenía entre sus manos. Se trataba de una colección de anuncios y esquelas.

Lorca tomó la carta. Por el aspecto dedujo que había sido escrita hace bastantes años.

Pensó que era una broma de mal gusto. Decidió continuar con la lectura.

Un hecho extraordinario sucederá en los próximos días. Cuando ocurra, te explicaré por qué. También te revelaré lo qué acontecerá después. Para que me creas, he puesto este anuncio dirigido a ti. Figura en el recorte del diario que viene con esta carta y lo hallarás bajo el título de "Y el Mago de Oz dice". Cuando me visites, te explicaré todo lo que necesitas saber. Espero que me creas antes de que sea demasiado tarde.

Lorca volvió a la hoja del periódico y leyó el anuncio publicado un siglo atrás.

"Y el Mago de Oz dice: Dorothy no dejará que el hombre de hojalata tenga su corazón".

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2

Tian Wang Zhao, embajador de China en Berlín, miró su móvil *Xiaomi MI 5G* y revisó las reuniones de su agenda. Era mediodía y constató que disponía de tres horas hasta la siguiente. Decidió ir a almorzar, pero antes consultó su otra agenda, la que compartía con Wu Minxia, su secretaria, y se informó del restaurante donde almorzaría. Nunca era el mismo, ni la misma hora. Su servicio de seguridad le explicó que a partir de una rutina cotidiana resultaba más sencillo planear un posible atentado. El restaurante era el "*Ännchen von Tharau*", situado en la otra orilla del río *Spree*, cercano a la embajada. La reserva estaba para las 13:00 bajo un nombre alemán: Herr Joseph Schwarz. Ni siquiera en los nombres de las reservas se seguía una rutina.

El embajador llegó con dos agentes de seguridad, se sentó, cogió la carta del menú y se dispuso a elegir: Ensalada de lechuga con salmón, ideal para los problemas de corazón que arrastraba desde hacía años. Relajó la posición de su espalda y miró al exterior. La luz quedaba tamizada por el día gris que se le abría desde dos inmensos ventanales situados enfrente. La calle no mostraba tráfico y los transeúntes caminaban desconectados del mundo que los rodeaba. Un extraño se situó frente a ellos, al otro lado del ventanal. No se distinguía si era hombre o mujer porque llevaba su cabeza cubierta con un sombrero. Sus gafas negras de sol le proporcionaban un aspecto inexpresivo. El embajador se inquietó y llamó a sus escoltas. Uno de ellos se giró para observarlo; el otro explicó que desde fuera no se veía el interior y que probablemente estaría mirando su reflejo. El extraño pegó su rostro al cristal y los escoltas se pusieron en posición de alerta. Tras unos segundos se alejó del ventanal, dio media vuelta y sacó un móvil del bolsillo; luego escribió un mensaje y desapareció. El embajador se tranquilizó. Sonaban de fondo los acordes de un Erhu, un violín

chino que le inundó de melancolía. En la pantalla de su móvil saltó la notificación de una tarea con el asunto de "Muy urgente".

Lo abrió, y su curiosidad se convirtió en pánico.

"Vas a morir ahora, tres, dos, uno... ¡adiós!"

Un clic seguido de una luz cegadora surgió bajo su asiento y lo arrojó por encima de la sala hasta reventar uno de los ventanales. Cayó sobre un coche estacionado al otro lado de la calle. Todo quedó recubierto por el polvo y solo se escuchaban los gritos de los clientes. El extraño del ventanal apareció entre el humo y se acercó al cadáver mutilado de Tian Wang Zhao. Se agachó unos segundos y colocó una nota a su lado. Se marchó sin prisa. Desapareció entre la multitud confusa y asustada que abarrotaba la calle. En la nota se leía:

"My name is Dorothy"

3

Lorca se despertó temprano. Las calles se vestían con la ligera penumbra que dejaba paso a las primeras luces del alba. Había pasado toda la noche en duermeverla a causa de una tos que se estaba agravando; pensó que le tocaba visitar al médico. Tanteó su mesilla, dio con un cigarro junto a la radio, lo encendió y luego lo dejó bailando en sus labios. Fumaba dos paquetes diarios. Se levantó, se acercó a la ventana y estiró la espalda. Dio varias caladas y mareó el cigarro entre sus dedos sin mirar a nada. Observó la hora y encendió la radio: Informaban del asesinato del embajador chino en Berlín. Cada mañana se dedicaba a analizar las noticias más impactantes del día e intentaba, por oficio, resolver lo qué había pasado. Finalmente, se desentendió de la radio, entró en el baño, soltó una mueca de enfado ante el espejo y dijo un Me siento viejo. Se masajeó la cara y se miró en esos ojos claros que le dieron fama de guapo y bastante éxito entre las mujeres, hasta que un día conoció a Merche en el parque de El Retiro, con la primavera en ciernes. Ella paseaba con un libro en la mano que hablaba de un Ulises que no era el de *La Ilíada*. Con el tiempo entendió que, si leyó aquel libro, es porque estaba preparada para aguantarle a él, a su carácter rudo, sus silencios, sus horarios de trabajo y sus idas sin venidas. A la atmósfera de humo y estrés; a las semanas enteras sin verlo por casa; y cuando llegaba, nunca hablaba, solo dejaba entrever que algo se le había ido de las manos en alguno de sus operativos en Euskadi. Lorca solía contestarle con un No me hagas preguntas, Merche; encendía un cigarro y lo sostenía entre los dedos con la mirada perdida, siempre con una mueca de enfado y mala leche; sin ganas de poner las noticias para no enterarse de lo que ya sabía. Algunas madrugadas, Lorca se situaba al otro lado del espejo y se veía en el salón de su otra casa, la que compartió con Merche cuando estaban juntos. Apagaba el cigarro en un cenicero y se giraba hacia ella para sacarla de su soledad acompañada. Le hablaba

de esto y aquello, o la escuchaba un rato. Aparcaba la bilis que le amargaba el aliento y la cambiaba por besos que no olían a tabaco negro, sino a Te quiero mi vida y No estés triste, que tenemos tantas cosas que hacer que si te las cuento me van a faltar dedos de las manos.

– Siempre fue nunca, Merche.

Lorca volvió en sí para escapar de aquel reflejo impostado. Se terminó de acicalar, regresó a la cama y escuchó la radio. Narraban los detalles sobre el asesinato del embajador. En el atentado fallecieron tres personas: el embajador y dos hombres de seguridad. Los heridos superaban la docena. Había sido un ataque de precisión porque la bomba solo afectó a su mesa. Lorca pensó que la habrían puesto bajo la silla del embajador. No comprendió cómo averiguaron en qué mesa almorzaría. Sospechó en complicidades, algún empleado del restaurante que cooperó, o un infiltrado de la propia embajada que pasó la información. Lorca entendió que esas pistas eran demasiado obvias. Se centró ahora en posibles asuntos de espionaje, agentes dobles o personal infiltrado; pero esa no era la manera de operar. Un asesinato efectuado de forma tan pública era una fuente de conflictos. Lorca se imaginó las tensiones que el atentado acarrearía.

La radio se hizo eco de una noticia de última hora. Se hablaba de un sospechoso que había dejado una nota junto al cadáver del embajador. El locutor comentó que en la nota venía escrito algo sobre “una tal Dorothy”, y remató la información con un toque macabro, porque después de años de espera, el embajador tenía un posible donante de corazón para su trasplante.

4

Chen Sūn, el jefe de seguridad de la embajada china, y Xen Yáng, agente experto en sistemas informáticos, se personaron en la escena del crimen. Los agentes de la Oficina Federal de Criminalística alemana habían acotado una zona de seguridad y les impidieron el paso. Los agentes alemanes habían accedido a las cámaras de seguridad y se confirmó que el sospechoso sabía dónde se situaba su objetivo. El análisis visual de los restos de la bomba presentó la primera pista: se trataba de un artefacto accionado por control remoto con ignición eléctrica. Chen Sūn no entendía cómo el asesino supo dónde y cuándo llevar a cabo el atentado, con el cuidado que tenían en la embajada para no tener rutinas. Xen Yáng le contestó que para no crear esas rutinas se generó una rutina en sí misma, y cayeron en una recursividad perniciosa.

Volvieron a la embajada para encontrar la base de esa rutina: su secretaria, Wu Minxia, organizaba la agenda del embajador todos los días, algo que en principio era lo habitual al ser su estrecha colaboradora. La agenda fue auditada y Wu Minxia puesta bajo arresto. Encontraron una tarea que fue registrada a la misma hora que estalló la bomba.

"Vas a morir ahora, tres, dos, uno... ¡adiós!"

La secretaria se convirtió en sospechosa hasta que el visionado de las cámaras de seguridad la mostró comiendo a la hora en que se registró la tarea. Los responsables de la seguridad informática fueron llamados al despacho para un interrogatorio. Expusieron su plan de contención y el acceso que se disponía a todas las agendas para que se sincronizaran por la red. Yáng hizo un amago para intentar exponer su desconfianza sobre lo poco seguro que era compartir la agenda por red, pero los técnicos se le adelantaron para señalar que no era de acceso público y que los datos se encriptaban.

– ¿Y la *wifi*? ¿Qué controles disponemos sobre ella?

Los técnicos respondieron que empleaban una clave alfanumérica de 64 caracteres, muy compleja, y que solo una serie de ordenadores registrados en una lista de control accedían a la red *Wifi* de la embajada. Yáng se ausentó unos instantes de la habitación y trajo el *rúter*, lo encendió y lo conectó a su portátil. Pidió la clave de acceso, entró y se perfiló en su rostro la sonrisa de un matarife que afila su cuchillo.

Negó con la cabeza mientras chasqueaba la lengua.

– Uno de vosotros se preocupó por cambiar las contraseñas de acceso – les dijo –. Pensasteis que con eso era suficiente.

Xen Yáng accedió a la lista de ordenadores que podían conectarse; y ahí apareció: un equipo que nadie reconocía y que con seguridad era el dispositivo desde el que se espió la agenda. Reclamó todas las memorias USB existentes en la embajada.

– ¡Y busquen en todos los cajones!

Las memorias USB se apilaron en su mesa. Todas impresas con la misma serigrafía: *Ānquán Logictics*. Yáng apreció que uno de los USB era diferente y llevaba serigrafiado el escudo de la embajada.

– ¿De dónde ha salido?

El técnico que lo trajo informó que estaba en el cajón de Wu Minxia, la secretaria. Ésta fue de nuevo interrogada y contestó que lo había encontrado sobre su mesa. Pensó que pertenecía a la embajada. Yáng se dirigió a los técnicos y les señaló que había sido tan sencillo como dejar una memoria USB con una serigrafía similar a la oficial.

Lo conectó a su portátil y accedió a uno de los ficheros mediante un editor de código binario. Le aplicó ingeniería inversa y sacó trazas que le proporcionaron varias pistas.

– Aquí observamos la forma en la que este archivo inhabilita la conexión wifi del ordenador y lo deja sin acceso de red. Eso obliga a introducir de nuevo la clave del *wifi*.

Wu Minxia le confirmó que perdía la conexión a internet con frecuencia y que los técnicos introdujeron la clave de acceso en varias ocasiones. Yáng sonrió al escuchar aquello. Dibujó rutas imaginarias sobre la pantalla y encontró otro código que se

conectaba a una página web y enviaba lo que el usuario del ordenador escribía en su teclado.

– Así obtiene la clave y penetra en la red – concluyó –. Si prosigo encontraré otro código para atacar el *rúter* y obtener su clave de administrador. A partir de ahí nuestro atacante introdujo su equipo en la lista de conexiones permitidas. Se conectó cuando le vino en gana y desde un lugar exterior a la embajada.

Yáng se sobresaltó. Dentro del código encontró el mismo mensaje que en la agenda.

– ¡Sorprendente! Ahora entiendo por qué los antivirus no lo detectaron. Está elaborado a conciencia para atacarnos. Su programador es un genio. Expertos de este nivel sólo se encuentran en dos lugares: uno es la "*Web profunda*", donde se encarga la programación de cualquier virus...

Yáng lanzó una mirada de preocupación a todos.

– ... El otro son los servicios secretos de algún país que ha querido atacarnos. Y eso lo hemos de averiguar de inmediato.

5

Lorca comprobó que había recibido varias llamadas de la Dirección Adjunta Operativa. Conocía ese número porque a lo largo de los años había visto desfilar a muchos directores y jefes. Con algunos fraguó una relación que sobrevivió a su carácter; y uno de esos supervivientes era Pascual Marín, recién nombrado director adjunto. Lorca se extrañó de la llamada, aunque a veces lo telefoneaba solo para preguntarle cómo estaba. Por un momento sospechó que se relacionaría con la carta y el anuncio que había recibido, aunque Pascual no se dedicaba a esos asuntos, y lo de atender investigaciones correspondía a las comisarías, no a la dirección adjunta. El teléfono sonó de nuevo y le contestó a Pascual que en unos minutos llego y voy directo a tu despacho. Él le respondió que vale, que te espero con Diego Vargas, el comisario jefe de la Policía Nacional de Madrid. Lorca cogió el sobre de su mesa, subió a la última planta y se dirigió al despacho del director adjunto. Llamó con suavidad a la puerta y Pascual lo recibió con un abrazo. Diego Vargas se encontraba junto a la ventana, se acercó y le tendió la mano. Era de la misma edad que Lorca y vestía de uniforme, con las divisas de su cargo en las bocamangas. En los años 80, en los que Lorca trabajó de infiltrado en Euskadi, Diego Vargas fue de comisaría en comisaría subiendo en el escalafón hasta que, en los últimos años, con Lorca chupando escritorio en su oficina del CGI, ocupó el cargo de jefe regional de operaciones y finalmente ascendió a jefe superior de la policía de Madrid. Por el contrario, Pascual había abandonado las apariencias de un policía cuartelero y estilaba el aspecto de un político bien trajeado, con el pelo apelmazado de gomina y una sempiterna tez morena.

Pascual señaló las dos sillas frente a su mesa y los invitó a sentarse. Miró a Lorca antes de hablar.

– ¡A ver por dónde empezamos! – le dijo –. Todo esto resulta un poco confuso. ¿Conoces a una tal Susana Torres?

– ¿La debería conocer?

Pascual miró a Diego antes de continuar.

– Como te decía, todo esto es un poco confuso. ¿Estás enterado del atentado en la embajada china en Berlín?

– Lo estoy.

– Sabemos que los chinos han descubierto el modo en que accedieron a su red informática para conocer los movimientos del embajador.

Diego Vargas intervino.

– La policía alemana ha confirmado la presencia de un sospechoso en el lugar y a la hora del atentado. Dejó una nota junto al cadáver del embajador y se identificó con el nombre de Dorothy.

Pascual habló.

– Se cree que el nombre se relaciona con alguna organización criminal – dijo –. Había un preparativo muy sofisticado para acceder a los ordenadores de la embajada.

– Se trata de un ataque en territorio europeo – Diego intervino de nuevo –. Algunas sospechas apuntan a que detrás de esa supuesta organización se oculten los servicios secretos de algún país, enemigo de China.

– No creo que esto nos afecte – interrumpió Lorca.

– Hasta ahora, no – le respondió Pascual –. Los chinos podrían denunciarlo como un acto de agresión hacia su país. A los americanos y rusos les chirriaría esa declaración porque se sentirían señalados.

– Y por eso los alemanes han preferido adelantarse – informó Vargas–. Han cursado una orden a la Europol para que se investigue el caso bajo el paraguas de terrorismo internacional.

– Esa orden de la Europol nos ha llegado a nosotros – continuó Pascual –. Investigaremos una serie de ataques informáticos que se efectuaron contra esa embajada desde España. Hemos activado la alerta terrorista.

Vargas desplazó su silla para colocarse frente a Lorca, igual que si fuese un careo.

– Hasta aquí el prólogo – afirmó –. Hace dos días, a eso de las once de la noche, una mujer se identificó como Susana Torres, y

acompañada de un varón identificado como Joaquín Cervera, acudió a una comisaría de la Policía Nacional en Málaga para informar que uno de nuestros agentes disponía de información sobre un atentado que se produciría en breve.

Diego abrió una carpeta y extrajo unos documentos.

– Según aparece registrado en la hoja de denuncia – continuó –, Susana Torres fue identificada a través de su DNI. En el informe no se explica a qué atentado se refería. Figura un comentario entrecomillado de “no se aportan pruebas”. Dio el nombre del agente y también dónde estaba destinado.

– ¡Eres tú, Lorca! – soltó Pascual–. Que conste que no te relacionamos con los hechos.

Lorca miró a ambos con extrañeza.

– No me siento acusado – replicó.

Diego Vargas cogió su carpeta para mostrar un nuevo documento.

– Susana Torres facilitó una dirección por si queríamos contactar con ella. Le informó al agente que se producirían más atentados y que solo hablaría contigo. ¿Comprendes por qué te hemos llamado?

Pascual intervino.

– Al activarse la alerta terrorista, los protocolos nos obligan a atender cualquier aviso de atentado.

Lorca tomó unos segundos para procesar la información.

– No conozco a esa mujer – les dijo –, pero tengo algo que podría relacionarme con ella y el atentado de Berlín.

Pascual y Diego se miraron sin saber cómo reaccionar.

– Esta mañana sucedió algo que me alertó – continuó –. En realidad, todo empezó ayer.

Lorca sacó del bolsillo el sobre, pidió unos guantes, lo abrió y sacó el recorte de periódico y la carta. Los colocó encima de la mesa de Pascual y ambos la leyeron.

– No le di ninguna credibilidad – les explicó–, pero al escuchar las noticias esta mañana en la radio, algo me puso en alerta.

Pascual releyó la carta por si se le había escapado algún detalle. Se fijó en el anuncio del periódico ABC de 1914. Tomó su

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Exploring the Variety of Random Documents with Different Content

CHAPTER III

The Story of Lucy

VICKI WENT TO THE BRYANTS' HOUSE NOT KNOWING quite what to expect. It was Friday the thirteenth, but since she was not foolish enough to be superstitious, the date alone did not account for her sense of something special about to happen.

"Well, I can expect lunch and conversation," Vicki thought, and went up the white marble steps of the Bryants' house. She was a little intimidated by its grandeur, and by the butler who admitted her. "My goodness, this is much too grand for *me*," Vicki thought. "They must be awfully rich."

The butler said, "Who shall I say is calling?"

"Miss Victoria Barr." Vicki tried to stand up taller than she was and look older. It never worked.

"Oh, yes, Miss Barr, you are expected."

She gave the butler her coat and followed him from the entrance hall, past a formal high-ceilinged living room, and into a big, sunny sitting room. It was cheerful in here, with flowered chintzes, green plants, and several extraordinarily beautiful parakeets in cages shaped like pagodas and dollhouses. Vicki exclaimed aloud "Oh! Lovely!"—without meaning to, just as the butler announced her.

Mrs. Bryant was sitting half hidden in an immense wing chair. She put aside the needlepoint she was working on and made a point of getting up to greet her young guest.

"How nice to see you again, Miss Barr. You were so busy yesterday on your plane that there was almost no chance to visit with you."

"I kept you busy, for one thing," Mr. Bryant said. "A tiresome old codger, wasn't I, young lady?"

Vicki smiled shyly, and said Mr. and Mrs. Bryant were kind to let her come. She asked Mr. Bryant how he was feeling.

"Better, thanks, better. Oh, I'm perfectly all right!" He started to pace up and down.

Mrs. Bryant changed the subject. She invited Vicki to sit next to her on the couch in the winter sunshine, and they chatted about the Electra. Mr. Bryant joined in with a question or two. He seemed less forbidding today. Still, Vicki thought, this imposing man would probably never be easy to get along with. She'd as soon attempt to be friends with a polar bear—he reminded her of an old, still powerful bear with his heavy, rolling gait and thatch of yellowish-white hair.

"Where's Dorn?" he demanded. "Not here yet?"

His wife said, "Mr. Dorn telephoned to say he will be a little late. It was unavoidable, dear."

"Humph. Well, I'll lie down again for a few minutes. Excuse me, ladies." He abruptly thumped out of the room.

Mrs. Bryant waited until he was out of earshot, then smiled at Vicki.

"When I invited you to lunch yesterday, Miss Barr," said Mrs. Bryant, "I thought you would be our only guest. But this morning a young lawyer who is doing a particularly important piece of work for us telephoned and asked whether he couldn't see us about noon today. So he'll be here for lunch, too. I'm sure you and I will have our visit, anyway."

Vicki was a little disappointed, and offered to leave rather than intrude.

"No, indeed!" Mrs. Bryant exclaimed. "I want you to stay. Mr. Dorn is going to tell us about Lucy—our granddaughter whom we've never seen." She looked very thoughtful. "Does that seem odd to you?"

Vicki was not quite sure what to answer. "Unless," she said, "your granddaughter has always lived at a great distance from you."

"Yes, she has. In every sense. Tell me, Miss Barr, in the course of your stewardess work are you ever in San Francisco?"

"I'll be in and out of San Francisco all the time, now that I'm based there."

"That's extremely interesting." But Mrs. Bryant did not say why. "Well. Shall we look at my parakeets?"

Vicki walked along with Mrs. Bryant and admired the exquisite birds in their cages. Her elderly hostess pointed out the birds' markings in every tone of blue and rose and green. Yet her mind seemed to be on something else.

"I hope you won't find it tiresome at lunch, Vicki, listening to a conversation about a girl you know nothing about."

"What is Lucy like?" Vicki asked.

Mrs. Bryant said helplessly, "I don't know. It *is* odd, isn't it? Our daughter's daughter, and we don't even know what she looks like. Except for an old snapshot. Lucy was ten when it was taken, and she's twenty-one now."

From a desk drawer Mrs. Bryant took a small, faded snapshot, in a frame, and handed it to Vicki. Vicki studied it. The little girl's face was rather blurred. She could have been any little girl sitting on a porch step. Her hair was either dark blond or light brown; it was hard to tell which.

"I suppose Lucy's hair might be darker by now," said Mrs. Bryant, as Vicki gave her back the snapshot. "Our daughter Eleanor wrote in one of her rare letters that Lucy had my disposition. They named her Lucy after me, in spite of—everything. But I must be boring you."

"I'm very much interested, Mrs. Bryant."

"Well, I *am* rather keyed up about Mr. Dorn's visit. So many old memories come to mind today. The silver rings, for one thing. I hadn't thought about them in years. There are only two like them. Lucy has one and I have the other."

Vicki glanced at Mrs. Bryant's hand. Her hostess noticed.

"No, I've put mine away. I never wear rings of any kind," Mrs. Bryant said. "They annoy me. But this pair of silver rings has an interesting history."

They had an identical lacelike, open design. Mrs. Bryant had long ago given one ring to her daughter Eleanor, and Eleanor in turn had given the ring to *her* daughter, young Lucy.

"Almost all Mr. Bryant and I know about our granddaughter is that she has the ring. We had a few facts about her schooling and a sketchy description of her. Eleanor wrote us those things before she died." Mrs. Bryant looked down at her tightly clasped hands. "As for

the letters from Lucy's father—" Mrs. Bryant stared past Vicki, past the birds. "We never answered certain of those letters and we were wrong. So terribly wrong!"

Then the whole grievous story of Lucy came tumbling out. Mrs. Bryant, in telling Vicki, tried hard not to blame her husband. But Vicki understood that Marshall Bryant was a man who valued money and important connections above all else. Mrs. Bryant could not cope with his domineering ways.



*Mrs. Bryant handed the faded snapshot to
Vicki*

The Bryants had planned a brilliant marriage for their only child. They were bitterly disappointed when Eleanor married against their wishes a boy who had little money and limited education. They felt, unjustly, that Jack was a fortune hunter. Marshall Bryant made several attempts to break up the marriage. When he failed, he disowned his daughter. He was determined that Jack Rowe should never get hold of the Bryant money, no matter what the penalty to Eleanor or to any children Eleanor would have.

The young couple moved to California “—to get as far away from us as possible, I suppose,” said Mrs. Bryant, and also because Jack had job opportunities there. As for Jack’s family, they were scattered over the United States and were not in touch.

The young couple made several overtures to the Bryants, especially after their daughter was born. They named her Lucy after her grandmother. But the old couple refused any reconciliation. They never saw their granddaughter. “I wanted to, but Mr. Bryant was adamant. No one can blame Eleanor and Jack for feeling resentful.” A rupture and silence of many years ensued. Once Mrs. Bryant wrote to her daughter, offering aid for small Lucy, but Eleanor never answered.

When young Lucy’s mother died a few years ago, her father wrote this news to the grandparents and asked if they wished to attend the funeral. Marshall Bryant decided that they would not go. Mrs. Bryant murmured, “It was hard to lose Eleanor without ever seeing her again.” Jack Rowe had suggested that the Bryants might, at long last, wish to see their granddaughter. But Marshall Bryant hinted that Rowe’s motive was a desire to gain their fortune. Young Lucy’s father, as a result, felt freshly antagonized, and wrote them a bitter letter. Once more the two families ceased to communicate.

Recently, within the past year, Marshall Bryant had developed a severe heart condition. "He's still active," said Mrs. Bryant, "but he may not have long to live. This knowledge has—has modified his personality. He is more concerned than ever about what will become of his fortune after he and I pass away. I am afraid he is not a charitable enough man to leave the bulk of it to institutions for—as he says—strangers to enjoy. Also, he now feels great remorse for disowning Eleanor, and for refusing any contact with her daughter."

As for herself, Mrs. Bryant said, she had grieved for years about the family rupture. For a long time she encouraged Marshall Bryant to make amends for the past. Finally, this past Christmas Day, they decided to find their granddaughter, Lucy Rowe, and arrange for her to inherit the Bryant fortune.

"*If* Lucy wishes to live with us, we'd be so happy."

"I'm so glad," Vicki said softly, "that you're trying to find her."

"You're right to say 'trying,' because all we definitely know about her is her last address in San Francisco. That's the one on Jack Rowe's letter five years ago." For a moment Mrs. Bryant closed her eyes. Then she said matter-of-factly, "A five-year-old address and an old snapshot aren't much to go on, are they? That's why we were relying on Mr. Dorn to locate Lucy for us."

Mrs. Bryant explained that she and her husband were too elderly, and he too ill, to travel to San Francisco and search for the girl themselves. Also, Mrs. Bryant said, they hesitated to approach Lucy directly, either in person or by mail. "After all the antagonism which my husband—and I, too—showed them, Eleanor and Jack naturally felt antagonistic toward us. I'm afraid some of that feeling may have been instilled in Lucy. She might not be glad to see her grandparents."

So Marshall Bryant had engaged his law firm to locate young Lucy and bring her East. He planned to transfer a generous part of the

inheritance to her immediately. The law firm assigned Thurman Dorn, a young man, to do the traveling and investigating involved in finding Lucy. Mr. Bryant was pleased with the choice. Though Thurman Dorn was relatively new in the firm, his uncle, now dead, had for many years done fine work for Mr. Bryant through the same law firm.

"My husband and I feel we know young Thurman Dorn," said Mrs. Bryant. "Our lawyers have told us that he came from Chicago, his home town, with the highest recommendation from one of his law school professors." She mentioned the name of the law firm, Steele and Wilbur. Vicki recognized it as a respected company. "Mr. Dorn has persuaded us to stay entirely in the background and to let him act as intermediary with Lucy. I do think that's the most discreet way in such a delicate situation."

A painful situation for a sick man and his elderly wife, Vicki thought. She said, "I do hope Mr. Dorn's search will be successful in every way."

"Thank you, my dear. Mr. Dorn was in San Francisco three or four weeks ago, and got his search for Lucy under way. Unfortunately he could not find her on that trip—she has been away—but perhaps he has some other leads or news to tell us about today."

"Oh! Do you think he'll bring Lucy with him?"

Mrs. Bryant smiled shakily. "I'm afraid to hope for so much. Let's go find my husband. He's feeling anxious, too."

When Thurman Dorn arrived a few minutes later, he was alone. Vicki was impressed by his air of professional competence, and by his personal dignity. He was about twenty-seven, a formal, cool young man, evidently highly educated, very correct in his manners and attire. His meticulously tailored gray suit, his British-looking mustache, the stiff way he stood, reminded Vicki of a fashion plate. Or perhaps of a stone statue. She wished someone less formal, less

unsentimental were to bridge the gap between young Lucy Rowe and her grandparents. Well, perhaps it took someone as cool, deliberate, and as obviously hard-headed as Mr. Dorn to trace Lucy in the first place. Vicki could see how highly Marshall Bryant valued this young lawyer.

Mrs. Bryant introduced Vicki and Thurman Dorn. He said "how do you do" to her with a delightful little bow and smile, and remarked—when Mrs. Bryant said, "Vicki Barr is a flight stewardess with Federal Airlines"—that he was an air-travel enthusiast. However, he quickly turned away, and had little further to say to Vicki during lunch. She was sure that Mrs. Bryant's mention of her work did not interest him and probably never registered with him at all.

He was busy describing to Mr. Bryant—and to Mrs. Bryant, too, though secondarily—the progress of the search for Lucy in San Francisco.

"Now, Mr. Bryant, and Mrs. Bryant, you already know that this search is not proceeding as easily and quickly as we would wish," Thurman Dorn said. "Reaching Miss Lucy takes time and patience. So will effecting a reconciliation."

The elderly couple listened to him, their hopes visibly rising and falling as he spoke.

"You know that I made only partial progress when, at your request, I visited San Francisco for a week, and personally conducted a search for your granddaughter."

"I remember receiving your bills from the St. Clair Hotel," Mr. Bryant said dryly.

Young Dorn accepted this with a deferential smile. "And unfortunately I had to come back and tell you the disappointing news that by the time I had located Lucy's present home and work

addresses, she had just gone off for a trip. For, I believe, a month or more."

Mrs. Bryant turned toward Vicki. "At least Mr. Dorn learned that Lucy has gone traveling with respectable friends, another girl and the girl's mother."

Mr. Bryant looked up from serving himself seconds from the dish the maid offered. "Well, sir, it's about a month now since you've been out there. You say Lucy will be back in San Francisco soon. How soon can you go out there again, and get on with this job?"

"Very soon, I hope, sir," Dorn said. "Although it would be a waste of my time and your money to wait around San Francisco until Miss Lucy returns."

"Don't see how a girl who you say is a secretary can afford to stay away longer than a month," Marshall Bryant grumbled. "Dorn, are you certain that this Lucy Rowe is actually our granddaughter?"

"No, I'm not certain. It's only a reasonable *presumption* at this point, Mr. Bryant. Let me actually see and talk to the girl. I want to question her—yes, discreetly—about certain particulars of the Bryant family history, which she would be likely to know. I want to see whether she has any of your old letters, or photographs of yourselves or your daughter Eleanor. That brings me to my reason, or one of the reasons, for asking you to let me come today."

"The name Lucy Rowe isn't so unusual," Mr. Bryant interrupted. "Might be more than one girl by that name in a city as large as San Francisco."

"Exactly my view, too, sir," said Mr. Dorn. "You have told me many details of the family history and shown me documents, but a few questions occur to me. Also, it would help in proving *this* Lucy Rowe's identity if you could let me really study those documents, and study any letters in your daughter Eleanor's handwriting or any

family photographs. If you happen to have any available that I could examine, say, overnight—or for a few hours this afternoon—”

“Good idea,” said Marshall Bryant. “Plenty of those things in the safe, right here in the house. I’ll lend them to you overnight or for a day or two. Whatever you say.”

“That will be a help,” said Mr. Dorn. “I’ll return them to you promptly.”

One thing puzzled Vicki. Why had no one at the luncheon table mentioned Jack Rowe, the girl’s father? She murmured her question to Mrs. Bryant.

“Because Lucy’s father died two years ago in an auto accident,” Mrs. Bryant answered her. “Lucy did not write and tell us. Lucy has never written to us, except one or two Christmas letters when she was a child—which my husband asked me not to answer.” Mrs. Bryant sighed. “So we had no way of knowing about Jack until Mr. Dorn investigated and reported to us about three weeks ago. I’m sorry about Jack, if only because his passing has left Lucy entirely alone in the world.”

“She has you and her grandfather,” Vicki said.

“*If* we can find her, and *if* she can forget old difficulties. However”—the elderly woman brightened—“on the basis of what he’s already learned, Mr. Dorn is hopeful that everything will work out well.” Then she said, “Oh, Mr. Dorn! Didn’t you say you had some further word about Lucy?”

“Yes, Mrs. Bryant. I’ve had a letter from one of her friends whom I was unable to meet in person. Her friend writes that Lucy is an accomplished swimmer and horsewoman. You know how Californians go in for sports and outdoor living. Her friend also wrote my firm—sorry I forgot to bring the letter—that Miss Lucy is fond of birds and knows something about them.”

"She'll be interested in your parakeets," Mr. Bryant said to his wife, "and she'll enjoy the swimming pool."

"Let's hope so. We old people might be dull company for her. She sounds like a delightful girl, Mr. Dorn."

The lawyer said, "From everything I've learned so far, she sounds like a charming girl, and a girl of considerable character."

Marshall Bryant looked gratified, while his wife looked so eager that Vicki felt almost afraid for her. How every detail which Mr. Dorn was able to supply increased their desire to meet their granddaughter! How disappointed they would be if Lucy were not all they wanted her to be, or if—Heaven forbid—Dorn could not locate their granddaughter after all.

As they were rising from the dining table Mrs. Bryant reminded the lawyer about the silver ring. "If you want another look at it, it's in the safe, too."

"Thank you, Mrs. Bryant. I *will* examine it again. It will be interesting to learn whether Lucy Rowe still has the silver ring which is twin to yours."

"Now, young man, how soon are you going back to San Francisco?" Mr. Bryant pressed him. "How about this week?"

The lawyer was inclined to wait until the next week, in order to be sure that Lucy Rowe was back in San Francisco. He offered to telegraph her employers and friends there to learn if and when she had returned. This was reasonable, the Bryants had to agree, but they were disappointed about the delay.

"I am sorry about the delay, too," said the lawyer, "but let us make haste slowly. Let's be a little cautious and discreet. There is a large inheritance involved here, you *are* well known, and if any false

moves were made, they'd invite a lot of publicity—newspaper stories, pictures in the paper, and so forth."

Mr. Bryant made a gesture of distaste, while Mrs. Bryant pretended to shudder. There was a moment's awkwardness. The lawyer turned to Vicki and said:

"I understand that you—ah—were of service to Mr. Bryant yesterday when he was taken ill."

"Not at all," said Vicki. "I'm just sorry Mr. Bryant didn't feel well enough to enjoy his flight on the Electra. Mr. Dorn, when you fly out to the West Coast do you go on the Electra, via Chicago?"

She said it only to make conversation, thinking someday Dorn might be one of her passengers. But suddenly his expression changed. She was surprised at the odd look on his face. Was he thinking of something else?

Mrs. Bryant said, "I believe, Mr. Dorn, you told us your mother still lives in Chicago?"

"Yes, I sometimes go home week ends to see her. Very occasionally."

"Of course. Well—I think my husband is waiting to see you."

"Oh, yes. Will you excuse me, Mrs. Bryant? Miss—ah—" He had forgotten her name. The young lawyer followed Mr. Bryant into the library.

Vicki felt that it was time to say good-by to her hostess. But Mrs. Bryant led her back into the room with the parakeets. By now the sun had moved to the far end of the room, and the birds were asleep. Mrs. Bryant took Vicki's hand.

"I hope all this talk about our granddaughter wasn't dull for you."

"On the contrary, Mrs. Bryant! I couldn't help thinking 'Suppose it were *my* grandparents whom I'd never seen, who were looking for me—'"

"You're sympathetic, Vicki. I wonder—You're going to be in San Francisco often?" Vicki nodded. "Then I wonder whether I could ask you to do me a great favor—but only if it won't take too much of your time."

Vicki said, and meant it, that if the favor had anything to do with Lucy, she would be only too happy to give it her free time.

Mrs. Bryant smiled. "Then I wish very much that you'd see whether *you* can learn anything further about our granddaughter. While I have every confidence in Mr. Dorn and his careful, discreet approach, this delay is very hard. Even another week or ten days seem such a long time to wait."

"I'll be in San Francisco day after tomorrow," Vicki said.

"Wonderful. If Lucy is back by then, won't you try to telephone her and give her my love? All I have is her last address in Sutro Heights in the suburbs, it's five years old—I think Mr. Dorn mentioned that she had moved in with friends in the city, in order to be nearer her place of employment. I wish I had thought to write down that firm name, but we are leaving everything, all the details, to Mr. Dorn."

"Do you think Mr. Dorn will consider that I'm interfering? I wouldn't want to cause any—any complications for him."

"I don't see how you could." Mrs. Bryant went to her desk for Lucy's last address, and copied it for Vicki. "It might be more tactful, though, not to let Mr. Dorn know that you are taking part." Vicki agreed. "And let's not mention it to my husband, either," Mrs. Bryant said with a gleam of mischief. "Here's the address, my dear. Thank you very, very much."

"Don't say that yet, Mrs. Bryant. First, let's see what I can do."

She thanked Mrs. Bryant for her hospitality, and said good-bye. Mrs. Bryant walked to the front door with Vicki, and stood looking after her as she went down the marble steps. She looked so hopeful and yet afraid to hope that Vicki thought:

"I'm going to do everything I can to help those two old people."

CHAPTER IV

A Puzzling Discovery

"I DON'T EVEN WANT TO HEAR ANYONE SUGGEST THAT we go sightseeing around San Francisco today," said Jean Cox from the other twin bed, on Monday morning. "I want to stay right here in our nice hotel room and sleep."

"I wasn't going to suggest sightseeing—not yet, anyway," said Vicki, at the mirror.

"Then why are you up and dressed so early? After those week-end runs we put in, why aren't you unconscious, too?"

On Saturday their crew had flown from New York to Chicago, stayed overnight in Chicago, and on Sunday had flown on from Chicago to San Francisco. Now they were to have a day in San Francisco to rest. Vicki figured she would rest later and look for Lucy Rowe first. She told Jean her plans.

"Well"—Jean yawned and stretched under the covers—"all I can say is that a frail-looking, dreamy-looking little blonde like you has more stamina than some of us husky people."

Vicki grinned. "Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?"

"Just go away, my love, and let me sleep."

They arranged to be in touch later in the day. Vicki softly let herself out into the hotel corridor and went downstairs to the busy

lobby. Part of the fun of being a flight stewardess was living all over the United States, and staying at the pleasant hotels where the airline put up their crews. Along with her breakfast Vicki enjoyed a magnificent view of San Francisco's hills.

Ever since talking with Mrs. Bryant, Vicki had kept Lucy Rowe's old address safely in her purse. Now she took it out. At the hotel desk she asked for directions to Sutro Heights. Vicki made her way there—riding up and down steep hills—walking down a long wooden stairway from one street level to another. She climbed past a cliff-top park with white-painted statues, high above beach and ocean.

"San Franciscans certainly have their ups and downs," Vicki thought, puffing. "But what views!" On three sides she looked down over the blue Pacific. The air was sea-fresh, cool, springlike. Vicki was so enchanted that she almost forgot about the address in her purse.

It led her to a modest, leafy street and an unpretentious cottage. There were a yard and an attempt at flower beds; children's toys littered the porch. When Vicki rang the doorbell, a pleasant young woman in shirt and jeans came to the door. She looked not much older than Vicki, or than Lucy's age, twenty-one.

"I'm looking for Lucy Rowe," said Vicki, and introduced herself. She was careful not to mention the Bryants, not to intrude on the lawyer's province. She said she understood that the Rows lived here, or used to. "I wonder whether you could tell me what Lucy Rowe's address is now?"

"My goodness, I should be able to! Lucy and I went to high school together; we're old neighbors, too. After her mother died my family bought their house. This house. Come in, Miss Barr. I'm Jill Joseph. Come in, don't mind the boys—"

The living room seemed to be overrun with very small boys and puppies. Young Mrs. Joseph shooed the whole group outdoors, and

she and Vicki sat down to talk.

"I haven't any address for Lucy at the moment," Mrs. Joseph said, "because she's away. Lucy is a darling. Are you a friend of hers?"

"I'm a friend of a friend of hers," Vicki said. "An elderly lady who hasn't heard from Lucy, or had any news of her, since Eleanor—Mrs. Rowe died."

"Why, that was five years ago!"

"Would you fill me in?" Vicki asked.

Jill Joseph nodded. "Five years ago Lucy and I still had another year to go in high school. Then she lost her mother. This house was quite a lot of work for Lucy and her father—you know how full the last year of high school is, and Mr. Rowe worked hard at—" She named a large San Francisco department store. "So Lucy and her father moved to a small apartment near here, and we bought their house."

"I see. What sort of work did Mr. Rowe do?"

"For a long time he worked at any job the department store gave him. The Rows never had an easy time of it financially." The neighbor hesitated. "It was hard on Lucy's mother; she seemed to be used to more than the Rows could afford. A lot of us wondered about Eleanor Rowe. Not that she ever complained—"

"Anyway," the young woman went on briskly, "Lucy's father finally worked himself up to be head of the store's delivery service, I think it was."

"What was Jack Rowe like?" Vicki asked.

"Nice. The most devoted husband and father you ever saw. He would have made a good doctor; he was so kind and patient and

gentle."

So this was the son-in-law the Bryants had considered unworthy of their daughter, Vicki thought.

"Lucy's mother was nice, too," the neighbor said, "though she was quiet and sort of sad, sometimes. She worried about what would become of Lucy. Lucy used to try to laugh her out of it.... My goodness, I'm chattering!"

"Won't you tell me more about Lucy?" Vicki said. "I'm not even sure what she looks like."

"Well, she's taller than you are, and slim—but she's strong. Good at all sports, and she knows a lot about naturelore." *Mr. Dorn had reported that,* Vicki recalled. "Brown hair, brown eyes, only sometimes they look hazel," Mrs. Joseph said. "She—she's active and friendly. Isn't it hard to describe someone you know? The chief thing about Lucy is that she's a nice person, and it shows."

"Does she miss her mother very much?" Vicki asked. "And her father?"

"Yes, terribly. Lucy's such a loyal and warmhearted person. She always befriends lost dogs, and hungry cats, and people who need her."

It was out of lonesomeness and a need to be with people, the neighbor said, that after her father died in an auto accident two years ago Lucy moved into downtown San Francisco to live with another girl and the girl's mother. Also, Lucy wanted to be nearer her job. After graduation from high school she had taken an intensive three-months' business course, and had been working as a secretary ever since—nearly four years by now.

"Can you tell me the name and address of her employer? And of the girl and her mother?" Vicki asked.

"Yes, I'll write them down for you. But you won't be able to see Mary and Mrs. Scott. They've gone off on a trip. Lucy is away, too."

So Dorn had learned, Vicki reminded herself. She asked:

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"She wasn't sure herself, when she called me up to say good-bye. Why don't you ask at the women's hotel where she's been living? Maybe she left word. It's the Hotel Alcott."

"The women's hotel?" Vicki felt confused. "I thought Lucy had been living with Mary and Mrs. Scott?"

"Well, she did until recently. I'm not sure how recently. Lucy and I aren't in constant touch." Jill Joseph explained that the Scotts' household was a small one, and Lucy had felt she was crowding them.

Vicki could not remember whether Mr. Dorn had reported where Lucy lived. She'd had the impression, and perhaps the Bryants did, too, that Lucy lived with the girl and her mother with whom she was now traveling. Well, Vicki thought, she'd clear up this point.

"If I telephone Lucy's employer," Vicki asked, "couldn't they tell me when she'll be back?"

"I think she gave up her job at the Interstate Insurance Company, though you can ask them."

"Gave up her job?" *Dorn had not reported this*. "Why?"

"Something about a new job. The kids were having a squabble, and I couldn't get it straight over the telephone."

"You mean Lucy starts on a new job when she comes back from her trip with the Scotts?"

"Lucy isn't traveling with Mary and Mrs. Scott. And I *think* traveling is part of her new job."

This news did not tally with Mr. Dorn's report, or more accurately, it went beyond the lawyer's report. Well, it was possible Lucy had been away during the period that Dorn was looking for her, and then had returned to give up her job and take a new one. Then, too, Jill Joseph admitted she didn't have all the facts straight.

"I'll inquire at the Hotel Alcott," Vicki said, "and at the Interstate Insurance Company."

"Try telephoning the Scotts, too. Perhaps they are back now and have heard from Lucy."

Vicki and Jill Joseph chatted a while longer. Vicki gathered that Lucy's life was rather bleak. Even though she had friends and one or two not important beaux, she missed her family and home, and felt alone. Evenings after work she often kept herself busy taking college courses, and attending church choir practice.

"I guess the Reverend Mr. Hall has done more than anyone to help Lucy feel less alone," Mrs. Joseph said. "He's a wonderful man. He knew her parents, and he's known Lucy all her life. He used to be in charge of a church here in Sutro Heights, but he's been transferred to Russian Hill. I'll give you his address, too."

A few minutes later Vicki thanked Jill Joseph and said good-by to her. "You've been a great help. More than you know."

"Anything I can do for Lucy—well, she needs all the help and love her friends can give her."

How wonderful it was going to be for Lucy, Vicki thought as she traveled back to the center of town, to discover that her grandparents cared for her. What a happy change in her life there would be.

On the way Vicki stopped at a drugstore and called the Scotts from a telephone booth. Their telephone rang repeatedly without answer. Vicki then called the Interstate Insurance Company and talked to the personnel manager.

"Miss Lucy Rowe?" he repeated. "Just a moment while I look up her card." A pause. "Miss Rowe resigned from our employ on January twenty-second."

Vicki scribbled down this date, and noted that it was now Monday, February sixteenth. A little less than a month ago ... just about the time Mr. Dorn said she had left San Francisco. Well, then, Dorn *was* right. Vicki asked whether the personnel manager could tell her anything further about Lucy.

"Well, I can tell you that she's an excellent secretary, was with us for over three years, and we were sorry to lose her."

"That's a fine record, isn't it? Thank you very much, sir."

Vicki hung up. She telephoned the Scotts twice again on her way back to downtown San Francisco. No answer. On a third call a man's voice answered.

"Mary Scott? She and her mother went away on a long trip. This is the superintendent. I'm in their place fixin' a leaky pipe.... No, ma'am, I don't know when they'll be home."

"Thank you," Vicki said. Next she tried the Reverend Mr. Hall's number. Here she kept getting busy signals. She decided to stop for lunch, then visit Lucy's place of residence.

Arriving at the Hotel Alcott in the early afternoon, she found it to be a pleasant, friendly, plain sort of place. A few people, mostly women, were in the lobby. She spoke to the desk clerk.

"I wonder if you can help me? I'm looking for Miss Lucy Rowe."

"Oh, yes, Lucy!" The middle-aged woman behind the desk smiled, but shook her head. "You won't find Lucy here, young lady. She checked out."

"Can you please tell me when? And where she is now?"

The woman hesitated. Vicki produced her airline identification card to introduce herself and explained that she had a message to deliver to Lucy. The woman seemed satisfied. She opened a ledger.

"Lucy checked out on—let me see—Saturday, February seventh."

That would be—today was Monday, February sixteenth—only nine days ago. *Yet Mr. Dorn reported that Lucy had left San Francisco a month ago.* Vicki could not account for the discrepancy. She asked the desk clerk:

"I wonder whether Lucy has been out of town—taken any short trips—in the last month or two?"

"Yes, recently some of the girls here persuaded her to go off for week ends with them, to ski, or to hike in the mountains."

"Can you tell me," Vicki asked the desk clerk, "whether Lucy was away about a month ago?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't remember the dates."

"Well, will you please tell me one more thing?" Vicki was trying to figure dates, starting with the fact of Dorn's visit about a month ago. "Did Lucy live at the Hotel Alcott a month ago?"

The woman consulted the ledger again. "Yes. Lucy was with us just barely a month."

It was possible, Vicki thought, that Lucy might not yet have moved to the Hotel Alcott at the time of Dorn's visit.

"If you're trying to locate Lucy, Miss Barr," said the clerk, "I think the best way to do it would be through Mrs. Heath."

"Who is Mrs. Heath?"

"A very nice older woman who is now Lucy's employer. Mrs. Elizabeth Heath. A writer. Gray hair, well-dressed, and distinguished-looking. She stayed with us at the hotel for a while. She was looking for a secretary-companion, and Lucy turned out to be just the right girl for the job." The hotel clerk said this with a certain pride and satisfaction. "It's a happy arrangement for both of them, I think."

Vicki was surprised, but she felt better. Here was definite and reassuring news of Lucy. She asked the woman for Mrs. Heath and Lucy's address.

"They haven't sent us their address yet," the woman said. "Probably they're just traveling around. Mrs. Heath had a car, and as I understood it, her plan was to travel around California and stay at inns here and there, and write her memoirs in a leisurely sort of way. Mrs. Heath *may* rent a house. It sounds like a lovely job for Lucy. A lot of the girls here at the Alcott would like to have such a job."

"It does sound like a pleasant job," Vicki agreed, "but how can I find Lucy, Miss—?" The clerk said her name was Mrs. Stacey. "Hasn't anyone here heard from Lucy since she left? Not even a post card?"

"She's been gone only a little over a week," the hotel clerk pointed out. "She'll write to her friends here, I'm sure. She may already be in touch with the minister, Mr. Hall; he's a great friend of hers."

Vicki said she had his address and telephone number and would call him right away. She thanked Mrs. Stacey for all her kindness.

When Vicki again telephoned the Reverend Mr. Hall, she was able to reach him. He was rather chary of giving any information on the

telephone. Vicki explained who she was, and told him a little of why she was looking for Lucy Rowe.

"Ah, I see. As a matter of fact, Miss Barr, I myself would like to know where Lucy is at the moment."

The minister's voice was friendly and direct. Vicki thought she heard an undertone of worry.

"Mr. Hall, I'm here at the Hotel Alcott, and they've told me Lucy has a fine job with a Mrs. Heath."

"Yes, I know. Everybody is enthusiastic about Lucy's new job except myself. I advised her to consider, and make haste slowly, but she—" Vicki heard voices in the background. "However, I can't go into this on the telephone."

"May I come to see you, Mr. Hall?" Vicki asked. "It's important for me to locate Lucy."

"Yes, indeed, though today is all filled up." He suggested that Vicki telephone him again in a day or two. Vicki promised she would, thanked him, and hung up.

Vicki went back to her hotel. She wanted to pack and to rest so that she would be fit for work: she was scheduled for an eight A.M. Electra flight the next morning.

Jean Cox was rested after extra sleep. "What did you find out about Lucy Rowe?" she asked.

"Don't ask me yet. I haven't any answers—only some new questions."

CHAPTER V

The Girl in the Portrait

FROM SAN FRANCISCO TO CHICAGO ON TUESDAY, AND back on Wednesday, left Vicki free by Thursday morning. She at once telephoned the minister. He said she might come over immediately.

Vicki found her way to Russian Hill, an area of steep, far-flung streets crisscrossed with leafy lanes. The church she was seeking was a handsome modern stone building. The minister's residence next door, in contrast, was one of the old wooden houses with lacelike balconies and ornate cupolas that had survived the San Francisco earthquake and fire. A housekeeper admitted her and led her into Mr. Hall's study.

Vicki's first impression of the minister was of a pair of extraordinarily perceptive eyes. He received Vicki simply, without any ceremony, and made her feel at ease. She presented her credentials, wishing she could tell the minister about Lucy's grandparents, and their wonderful plans for her.

"I'm glad you have come to me, Miss Barr," he said. "Are you a little worried, too, about Lucy?"

"I don't know what to think, Mr. Hall. I had been advised by Lucy's—ah—friends in New York that she was probably on vacation traveling with friends. Now I find that isn't exactly how it is, unless there's been some misunderstanding."

The minister said that was possible. "Let me speak frankly to you, Miss Barr. I wasn't keen about Lucy's taking this job, at least not so quickly. I asked her to get a little better acquainted with Mrs. Heath first, before she went off traveling with her. It's true Mrs. Heath showed Lucy unimpeachable references, and she seems to be a substantial person."

"Did you meet Mrs. Heath?" Vicki asked.

"I very much wanted to," the minister said, "but unfortunately the lady was too ill with a virus to see me. We did have a pleasant telephone conversation. I was left with the impression that she is above reproach. Still, I'm not satisfied." He looked out the window where a lemon tree stood. "You see—"

The minister said that Lucy had met Mrs. Heath at the women's hotel, and liked her from the start. In some ways Mrs. Heath reminded Lucy of her mother, whom she missed. Within a short time, only about a week, they were good friends and Mrs. Heath asked Lucy whether she'd like to be her secretary and traveling companion. Lucy came to Mr. Hall to talk it over with him. Mrs. Heath's offer was attractive, a long-term job, interesting work, a good salary plus all her living costs paid for by Mrs. Heath, and a chance to travel. Lucy felt confined, living in the city and working at a routine job, so Mrs. Heath's plan appealed to her.

"I pointed out to Lucy that she needn't be in such a hurry to give up her job and accept this new one," said the minister. "But she told me Mrs. Heath was eager to start work on her book. At any rate, as Lucy pointed out to me, they did not rush off at once."

Lucy gave up her job at the insurance company and for the next two weeks helped Mrs. Heath prepare for their trip, and did some library research for her. "I must admit Lucy seemed interested and happy," said the minister. In those two weeks Mrs. Heath allowed Lucy plenty of time to wind up her own affairs in San Francisco.

Then, using Mrs. Heath's car, or, rather, a car which Mrs. Heath rented for several months, they started out.

"When did they start?" Vicki asked.

"It was a Saturday, I believe the first Saturday in February."

Vicki scribbled down this date, with a note. "And did they say where they were going?"

"Oh, yes, certainly," the minister answered. "I don't wish to give you the wrong impression about Mrs. Heath," the minister said to Vicki. "I only wish Lucy had gone more slowly and made sure that she and Mrs. Heath really would be compatible over a period of several months' close association—and checked a little on Mrs. Heath's financial ability to pay all the bills and Lucy's salary."



"Are you worried, too, about Lucy?" Dr. Hall asked

Their plan, the minister told Vicki, was to head slightly north and east of Sacramento, into the Mother Lode country. Mrs. Heath had

made an earlier trip through the hill region and had said that she might possibly rent a house in the area.

"I received a post card from Lucy," said Mr. Hall. "Just a moment."

The minister picked up a picture post card from his desk and handed it to Vicki. It was postmarked Placerville, California, February seventh, at four P.M. Vicki glanced at the desk calendar. February seventh was the first Saturday in February.

"Wasn't this post card mailed the same day that Lucy and Mrs. Heath started out?" Vicki asked.

"Yes. Evidently Lucy mailed the post card en route. She says nothing, actually—'Beautiful country, beautiful weather. Will write soon.' But she hasn't written since, Miss Barr. Not to me or, so far as I can learn, to any of her friends. And I don't know where she is."

Vicki felt a sharp misgiving. "Have you—have you planned to take any steps to get in touch with her, Mr. Hall?"

He hesitated. "It's not quite two weeks since Lucy left. I believe they planned to work on Mrs. Heath's book, so that possibly Lucy hasn't had a chance to write to me. I don't mean to alarm you, Miss Barr."

"But I think *you* are a little alarmed, Mr. Hall?"

He thought for a moment. "Now that you pose the question, yes, I am uneasy about Lucy."

"Did a Mr. Dorn ever call you?"

"Dorn? No."

That troubled Vicki. She also wondered what really lay behind Lucy's change of jobs. She remarked as much to Mr. Hall.

"Yes, I feel there is more to know about Lucy's job situation than we do know," he said. He reflected. "Maybe Gravy could tell you something more."

Vicki smiled. "I beg your pardon, but did you say someone's name is Gravy?"

The minister smiled back at her. "Graves. Knowlton Graves. He and his wife are young people, friends of Lucy's. She's the one who dubbed him Gravy. He's a painter, and he's been doing Lucy's portrait. I think that because of work on the portrait the Graveses had been seeing Lucy oftener than anyone else had, just before she left."

"Do you think Mr. and Mrs. Graves would be willing to talk to me about Lucy?" Vicki asked.

"We'll see." Mr. Hall picked up the telephone and dialed a number. He talked to Knowlton Graves, paving the way for Vicki. "Yes, I think Miss Barr can come over right away." Vicki nodded. "What?... Yes, I'll tell her. Thanks very much," and the minister hung up. He turned to Vicki.

"Gravy wants me to tell you, with due apologies, that he has a heavy work schedule. If you're willing to go over to Telegraph Hill for just a short visit, he'd be very glad to see you."

Vicki got to her feet. "Even a few minutes' talk could be revealing."

Mr. Hall wrote down the Graveses' address, and gave Vicki directions for getting there. She thanked the minister warmly for all his help and kindness. He said, just as warmly:

"I feel you and I are in league for Lucy's best interests." He smiled, and his eyes seemed to look through and through her. "Perhaps you have more news of Lucy than you were willing to

confide in me on a first visit. Come back and see me again, whether or not you learn any news."

Gravy was a large, noisy young man. He boomed at her that his wife Maggie was out shopping, he'd made a mess of the studio, and if she was a friend of Lucy's how come he'd never met her before?

Vicki followed him into a workmanlike studio, explaining that she was only the friend of a friend of their mutual friend.

"How's that again?" Gravy boomed at her. He looked at her sternly. "Interesting planes in your face. Ever sit for a portrait?"

Vicki perched on a paint-splattered wooden chair and said firmly, "No, and I'm afraid I'm too busy to. Can we talk about Lucy?"

"Okay. Gosh, you look serious. There isn't anything wrong, is there? About Lucy, I mean."

"I don't *know* that anything's wrong," Vicki said carefully. "It's just that I've heard confused reports about her, and she's gone off traveling with a woman she hardly knows. That wasn't wise."

"My wife feels the same way you do—though I say that Heath woman sounds all right. Don't worry." Gravy moved a pile of unframed canvases out of the way, and sat down facing Vicki. "Lucy likes that Mrs. Heath. She was motherly to Lucy, I guess that's why."

Vicki asked whether the Graveses had heard from Lucy. They had not, and Gravy was untroubled about it. He said blithely:

"All I want is for Lucy to drop by here one of these days, so I can finish her portrait. Want to see it?"

He rummaged through the pile of canvases, pulled out one, and set it on an easel so Vicki could see it. She took a long, curious look. Allowing for the painter's rather abstract style, she could see from Gravy's portrait what Lucy Rowe looked like—a girl with big eyes, light-brown hair, a rather square face which in a feminine version recalled Marshall Bryant's. Vicki could also see a little of Lucy's pleasant personality from the easy way she had tossed a bulky green wool scarf around her shoulders, and her friendly half-smile.

"Lucy looks as if she's about to speak," Vicki said.

"Well, we did talk a lot while we were doing this portrait," Gravy said. "She was all excited about the job offer from Mrs. Heath."

"Did she ever talk about anyone else?" Vicki asked. "About her parents, or—or her grandparents?"

"It's funny that you should ask that. Sure, she always talked about her parents. But during the sittings a lot of stuff about her grandparents came out. Funny she never would mention their name, it was such a touchy subject with her." Gravy looked searchingly at Vicki. "I guess it's all right to repeat it, it's not exactly a secret. A confidence, maybe. Well—

"Lucy told Maggie and me she'd always felt no one but her parents ever really wanted her or cared about her. She just couldn't believe her friends care a whole lot about her, or that some day she'll find a husband who cares for her and needs her. You know what that feeling comes out of? From the way her grandparents rejected her and her parents, all of Lucy's life. Made them feel humiliated, left out. Wouldn't answer their letters. Never even cared to meet their granddaughter. The three Rowses didn't have any close relatives. They sort of huddled together by themselves; then Lucy lost her mother, and then her father. So now Lucy feels alone, and unwanted.

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